



ROBOTS'

BYTE OF HOSPO PIE

Keenon Robotics' ButlerBot W3

PLAYING AN IMPORTANT SUPPORT ROLE IN THE BROADER HOSPITALITY SECTOR, TECHNOLOGY IS SMOOTHING THE SERVICE PATH FOR LEADING ACCOMMODATION PROVIDERS AND FORWARD-THINKING RESTAURANTS.

MEETING DEMAND FOR STAFF IN New Zealand's hospitality sector has been a very real challenge throughout the country for several years now, with the pandemic labour force "hangover" still rearing its head.

However, robotic technology is starting to play a supporting role within some segments of the market, and as well as being a novelty factor, there are quantifiable benefits for businesses that can justify the initial outlay of sophisticated hospitality robots.

Is this the thin edge of the wedge for the service industry or will it – as the people HTL canvassed within the sector purport – be a breath of fresh air for operators and customers alike.

VERY KEEN

KEENON Robotics, think "Keen On Robotics", was established in 2010 and has been at the forefront of the commercial service robot industry pioneering core technologies, forging supply chains, and helping to shape the global adoption of service robots.

With a presence in over 60 countries, KEENON's head of sales for Australia and New Zealand, Wendell Feng says it specialises in providing comprehensive solutions for wide-ranging scenarios by harnessing the power of artificial intelligence, and encompassing algorithm learning, data integration, and scenario adaptation.

"This technological stack facilitates digitalisation and intelligent transformation across service industries and KEENON continually pushes the boundaries of innovation.

"WHILE THEY PERFORM TASKS AUTONOMOUSLY, A COLLABORATIVE AND COMPLEMENTARY APPROACH WITH HUMANS HARNESSES THE STRENGTHS OF BOTH HUMANS AND ROBOTS TO OPTIMISE EFFICIENCIES."

WENDELL FENG, HEAD OF SALES AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND, KEENON ROBOTICS



staff to focus on personalised customer interactions, and improving service consistency and operational efficiency.

"DINERBOT T10 also offers a suite of advanced features, including comprehensive sensor detection, multi-modal interaction, a large screen display in the front for effective advertising, and exceptional navigation capabilities, even in narrow spaces.

"It even has a customisable flexible movable head, which allows for unique facial expressions and a multi-modal design that incorporates voice, touch, and vision capabilities."

With pressures on staffing, Feng says the versatile hotel service robot BUTLERBOT equipped with a secure, enclosed, and adjustable cabinet can efficiently handle four errands consecutively and deliver room service to any hotel floor at any time of day or night.

"M Social Auckland is the first New Zealand hotel using a BUTLERBOT W3 which they've named H.A.R.I. (Hotel Automated Robot Implement) and it can independently use elevators, hold a wide variety of items from restaurant orders to towels and amenities, and deliver them to guests.

"H.A.R.I. can communicate with the hotel's elevator and phone systems, alert guests to retrieve their deliveries upon arrival, and after completing tasks, it autonomously returns to its charging station."

Feng stresses that KEENON's robots are designed to collaborate with humans – not replace them.

"While they perform tasks autonomously, a collaborative and complementary approach with humans harnesses the strengths of both humans and robots to optimise efficiencies."

The role of robotics in shaping the future of various industries is poised to be significant, particularly in light of labour shortages, says Feng.

"By transitioning manual work into a collaborative effort between humans and machines, robots free staff from repetitive physical labour tasks so they can redirect their focus towards improving service quality.

"According to the International Federation of Robotics (IFR), many young individuals are inclined to work for companies that leverage future technology and so the presence of robots in the workplace can be used as an enticing factor in job recruitment.

"Because robots excel at handling tasks that are dull, dirty, dangerous, or difficult—often referred to as the '4 Ds', not only are jobs more appealing but it also allows employees to allocate more time to upskilling for more interesting and fulfilling roles.

"The adoption of service robots is expected to increase as businesses recognise the benefits of human-robot collaboration and automation in various industries."

PUDU INFLUENTIAL IN NZ

Tech-enabled products from PUDU Robotics, distributed here through G Robotics, can be found in numerous establishments around New Zealand, including SkyCity facilities, Cobb & Co restaurants and Sudima Auckland Airport.

Headquartered in Shenzhen China, PUDU is one of the largest service robot manufacturers in the world with a presence in more than 60 countries, offering comprehensive bespoke solutions for customers across many different industries.

Its products are widely used in sectors such as food and beverage, hospitality, healthcare, and logistics and the company is continually expanding the application scope of service robots through technological innovation.

Optimising the hotel experience for guests, streamlining operational models,



PUDU Robotics' delivery and reception robot KettBot

improving efficiencies and reducing costs are among PUDU's aims with intelligent products for hotel reception service, room service, catering and cleaning services available and in use throughout New Zealand today.

BellaBot and FlashBot are PUDU's most widely adopted products in the New Zealand market.

RELIABLE SUDIMA TEAM MEMBERS

Les Morgan, chief operating officer for Sudima Hotels says new technology has been introduced throughout its hotel network and across a range of touch points within its operations.

"Most customers would be largely unaware of the improvements technology has brought to their hotel experience and this is a key desire when introducing new systems," he explains.

"However, the technological initiatives in our restaurants and bars are more obvious, with QR code ordering systems allowing guests to bypass waitstaff and send an order direct to the kitchen or bar.

"At the Sudima Auckland Airport hotel, these orders – or those made via the QR code room service menu – will be delivered to the table or room by robot and this has had a positive material impact on operating outgoings, reducing labour costs by more than 15 percent.

"Further, a housekeeping robot trial is planned for later this year with the robot to act as a 'runner', transferring linen to the floors from a central storeroom."

Guests have warmly welcomed the robots, says Morgan, adding that there is an obvious novelty factor, but they soon see the benefits of a contactless service – notably the efficiency and ability to control the cadence of their experience.

"OUR DELIVERY ROBOT HANDLES 60 PERCENT OF ALL ROOM SERVICE DELIVERIES AND OUR GOAL IS TO HAVE A BAGGAGE/PORTER ROBOT DEPLOYED BY THE NEW YEAR."

LES MORGAN, CHIEF OPERATING OFFICER, SUDIMA HOTELS



"Our delivery robot FlashBot at Sudima Auckland Airport handles 60 percent of all room service deliveries and our goal is to have a baggage/porter robot deployed by the new year. Following this, we plan to introduce robots to all Sudima and Hind Management properties.

"Additionally, keyless room cards will be commonplace within 12 months and self-check-in kiosks are already in use across the majority of our hotels."

Morgan says the commissioning of any new technology always comes with a few challenges, however, the robots have been surprisingly easy to settle in.

"We have learnt you need to remember to plug them in at the end of the day but pleasingly, none have called in sick, got stuck in traffic or suddenly needed to attend a grandmother's funeral."

GREEN'S MASCOT

With the Bay of Islands particularly hard hit with labour shortages in the hospitality industry, introducing the G Robotics-distributed robot, BellaBot two years ago has been a game-changer for Green's Thai Cuisine Paihia, according to director Vikas Sharma.

"BellaBot plays a pivotal role in our establishment by expediting the food delivery process from the kitchen to the tables and has allowed our waitstaff to allocate more of their time to engaging with customers and providing the exceptional service they expect.

"The reaction from our customers has been overwhelmingly positive as they appreciate BellaBot's efficiency and speed in delivering their orders and the novelty factor has been a hit, often leading to social media shares and positive word-of-mouth reviews.

"BELLABOT HAS BECOME SOMETHING OF A MASCOT FOR OUR RESTAURANT, AND CUSTOMERS LOOK FORWARD TO HER VISITS DURING THEIR DINING EXPERIENCES."

VIKAS SHARMA, DIRECTOR, GREEN'S THAI CUISINE PAIHIA

"BellaBot has become something of a mascot for our restaurant, and customers look forward to her visits during their dining experiences."

Sharma says Green's continues to explore tech-related initiatives to enhance its customer-facing business.

"In the near future, we plan to introduce self-service kiosks for takeaway orders, offering customers a convenient and contactless way to place orders.

"Additionally, we will provide customers with the option to order directly from their table using QR codes and these initiatives aim to further streamline our operations and cater to evolving customer preferences."

Sharma says he's pleased to report that BellaBot has operated seamlessly in the restaurant and gets a great performance review.

"Orders are consistently delivered with precision, and we have not encountered any issues with mix-ups," he says.

"Any deviations from a smooth operation have typically been the result of human error, such as incorrect table number inputs by kitchen staff, so BellaBot has been a reliable and valuable addition to our team."

SKY'S THE LIMIT

David Allott, general manager hospitality at SkyCity says late last year, it was struggling with hospitality staff recruitment as ongoing impacts of the pandemic continued to be felt well after lockdowns ended.

"Because of this, and our desire to not stretch our existing staff too thinly, we decided to introduce G Robotics robots into Andy's Bar and Restaurant last October.

"Buzz and Bella were introduced to deliver food to tables, and an automated cocktail-making machine was installed behind the bar to reduce the time patrons were waiting on drinks.

"Our last customer survey showed 89 percent are really happy with the robots, kids absolutely love them as the robots will sing Happy Birthday if asked, and customers are always taking selfies and videos with them.



PUDU Robotics' BellaBot in operation at SkyCity.

"WE ARE ALWAYS LOOKING TO BE AT THE FOREFRONT OF NEW TECHNOLOGY HOWEVER IT'S HARD TO REPLACE THE PERSONAL TOUCH AND INTUITION WHICH COMES WITH HUMAN INTERACTION."

DAVID ALLOT, GENERAL MANAGER HOSPITALITY, SKYCITY

"They have been a great benefit to the business, providing service, entertainment and helping promote the reopening of Andy's."

Allott says SkyCity continues to see an uptake in app usage and QR code ordering (and payment) at its casual dining outlets, and predicts this will increase moving forward, with

other tech-enabled initiatives being considered, too.

"We have also looked at other robotic alternatives, particularly in housekeeping which is another area which often struggles with staffing.

"We've trialled several new technologies, however, the high standards required for 5-star accommodation weren't being met and needed some refinement, but it may be something we look at again in the future.

"We are always looking to be at the forefront of new technology however it's hard to replace the personal touch and intuition which comes with human interaction, so this will always be our preference.

"The technology we have invested into recently has been focused on securing our customers' safety, with new security and host responsibility software in place across the SkyCity precinct, ensuring we can monitor and respond to any anti-social or troubling behaviour."